DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 113 RC 018 932

AUTHOR Potter, Tom G.
TITLE Large Group Weekend Outdoor Experiences: Finding Meaning - Nurturing Growth.
PUB DATE Oct 92
NOTE 9p.; In: Hanna, Glenda M., Ed. Celebrating Our Tradition Charting Our Future: Proceedings of the International Conference of the Association for Experiential Education (20th, Banff, Alberta, Canada, October 8-11, 1992); see RC 018 928.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Individual Development; Models; Outdoor Education; *Program Effectiveness; Secondary Education; Self Concept; *Self Disclosure (Individuals); *Weekend Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Wilderness Education Programs

ABSTRACT

This report discusses key components of the Wilderness Personal Growth Model that was designed to help practitioners attain maximum benefits through short-term wilderness programs accommodating large groups of students. The first component involves the successful transition of the students from their known and accepted everyday-life reality to the foreign reality of wilderness living. It is the unpredictability and loss of convenience and control that forms new physical and subsequently emotional and social realities for students. The use of reflection encourages students to think about their physical, emotional, and spiritual journeys and thus derive greater meaning and personal growth from their experiences. Appropriate self-disclosure can heighten the reflective process and allow individuals to see others' true identities. Another important component is the mutuality model that emphasizes a do-look-learn method of teaching. This model allows students to take an active part in their learning and thus enhances the students' sense of ownership and meaning. The use of mini-solos of 45 to 60 minutes of quiet self-time can offer the most powerful form of private reflection. Cooperative and initiative task games help to accelerate the interpersonal trust, respect, cooperation, and social cohesion that is often experienced during longer outdoor trips. Weekend outdoor experiences can achieve the growth potential of longer wilderness trips. (LP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Barbara Baker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED353113

LARGE GROUP WEEKEND OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES: FINDING MEANING - NURTURING GROWTH

Tom G. Potter
Department of Physical Education and Sport Studies
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2H9
(403) 431-1668

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

This article discusses key components of the author's Wilderness Personal Growth Model. The model is designed to assist practitioners working in a wide variety of educational, social and environmental milieus to attain maximal intra and interpersonal growth through short-term wilderness programmes accommodating a large group of students. While the natural educative value of wilderness cannot be denied, it is theorized that through the use of the Wilderness Personal Growth Model learning outcomes and growth through outdoor programmes can be amplified. The model is conceptualized to enhance potential growth and develop a greater awareness of self, others and the environment during and after short-term wilderness group experiences.

Note: Only a portion of the Wilderness Personal Growth Model will be presented in this article. For further information please contact the author.

*****

For logistical and financial reasons, the majority of institutions are unable to extend their wilderness experiences beyond three days and two nights, and have to cope with the reality of large groups. With this in mind, many education professionals question the value and cost effectiveness of brief wilderness experiences. The purpose of this article is to introduce key portions of the Wilderness Personal Growth Model (Potter, 1992) (*see Figure 1*). The model is designed to help practitioners attain maximum benefits and growth through the more logistically viable weekend trips while accommodating a large number of participants.

The need for quality short-term wilderness education programmes is great. Miles (1987) points out that conventional schooling focuses primarily on intellectual growth and infrequently touches on the physical aspects of education. Furthermore, modern education seems to pay even less attention to the emotional, social and spiritual aspects of being. Miles and Priest (1990) argue that the development of physical skills, such as learning to paddle a canoe or climb a rock, should be secondary to the primary educational goals of outdoor education. Physical skill acquisition, while important, should be a tool or a medium through which participants may achieve deeper and lasting goals of education through the out-of-doors.

Unfortunately, many outdoor practitioners still focus on skill acquisition in the out-of-doors and either ignore the human skills or assume and hope that they will grow independently. Acknowledging this phenomena, Godfrey (1972) states that "[outdoor] staff should put at least equal energy into developing a facilitative atmosphere for productive interaction between participants as

RC 018932

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

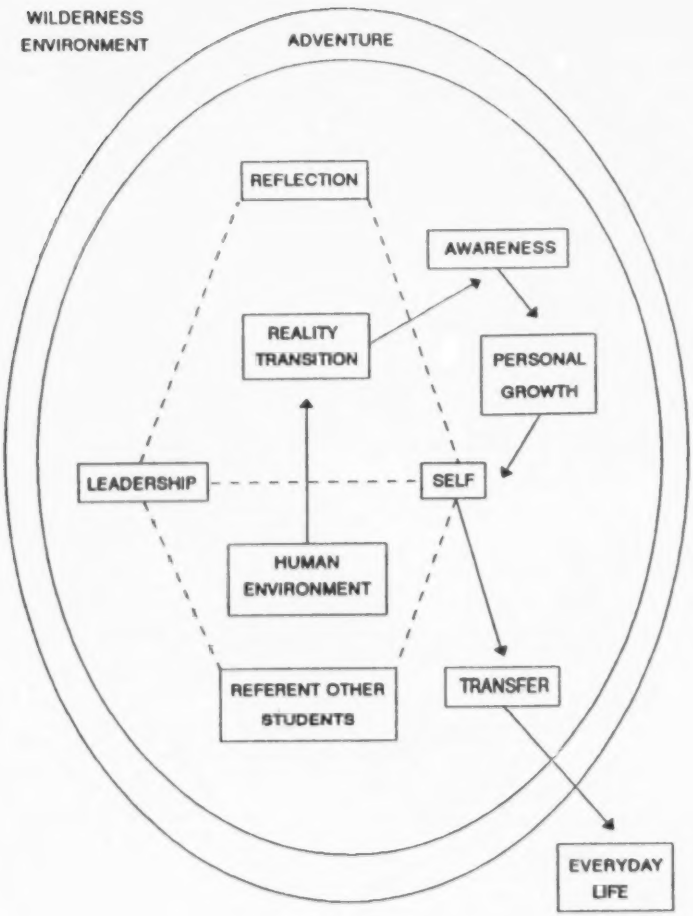

Figure 1. Wilderness Personal Growth Model

they do in organizing sessions of rock climbing." Instructors who solely ascribe to the philosophy of psychomotor skill development fail to grasp the opportunity of perhaps the most significant and worthwhile purpose of a wilderness experience - the empowerment of self and the magnification of personal awareness and interpersonal skill development. Intuitively and sensibly led, an outdoor journey has the potential to connect participants to a higher sense of values, meaning and purpose in their lives (Hendee & Brown, 1988). Through specific methodological processes, such as those found in the forthcoming Wilderness Personal Growth Model, much personal growth and development is attainable, although not ideally so, during the more popular short-term excursions accommodating a large group of students.

I believe, as does Bacon (1983), that, "when people and wilderness are brought together, there arises a true potential for a profound and compelling experience. The humans offer consciousness,

recognition and worship to the natural world. In response, it [wilderness] displays symbols and provides challenges urging humans toward their highest potential." Practitioners, however, should not fall into the trap of relying on these intrinsically educative qualities of the outdoor environment (Miles, 1987). Such faith tempts potential outdoor educators to abdicate their teaching responsibilities once their students are placed in a wilderness milieu. While the natural educative value of wilderness cannot be denied, the model theorizes that through the use of its methodologies, learning outcomes and growth through outdoor programmes can be amplified. The Wilderness Personal Growth Model, therefore, is designed to assist practitioners, working in a wide variety of educational, social and environmental milieus, to enhance the intra and interpersonal growth of their short-term wilderness group experiences.

Practitioners, however, should not fall into the trap of relying on these intrinsically educative qualities of the outdoor environment (Miles, 1987). Such faith tempts potential outdoor educators to abdicate their teaching responsibilities once their students are placed in a wilderness milieu. While the natural educative value of wilderness cannot be denied, the model theorizes that through the use of its methodologies, learning outcomes and growth through outdoor programmes can be amplified. The Wilderness Personal Growth Model is conceptualized to enhance potential growth, develop a greater awareness of self, others and the environment during and after short-term wilderness group experiences. While it is beyond the scope of this article to fully explain this model, several key portions of it will be presented. The presented portions of the model include reality transition, reflection, self-disclosure, the Mutuality Model (Koziey, 1987), solo, and initiative task activities.

Reality Transition

An underlying element of the model is the successful transition of the students from their known, accepted and comfortable everyday life reality to the foreign reality of wilderness living. A student participating on a recent canoe trip exclaimed that during the experience "everything changed - everything." The physical alteration of living in a wilderness environment as opposed to an urban setting is perhaps the most obvious of these changes. Wilderness is a surrounding where modern conveniences are not available and individuals must rely on resources at hand for their comfort and ultimate survival. Basic human needs such as eating and sleeping as well as coping with the natural elements are all very different from most students' home life. Additionally, they are less able to exercise control over their living environment than in everyday life. Predictability of a wilderness experience is thus reduced by this lack of control. A novelty for the majority of today's students. Faced with more unknowns and less comfort and control than found in their home life, a level of uncertainty is always present (Miles, 1990). It is this unpredictability and loss of convenience and control that form new physical and subsequently emotional and social realities for the students.

In addition to the students' physical reality, their emotional and social realities during weekend wilderness experiences stand in stark contrast to their daily university lives. The stress and anxiety of attaining good grades, competition among peers and the feeling of unimportance in the chaotic web of university life often make up the day to day emotional and social realities for many first year students. Most students on a wilderness journey express gratitude and relief to escape from these stressors pressuring their lives. They appreciate and savour the opportunity to relax, be themselves and reflect upon where they have come and where they were going. Additionally, many students admit surprise at how close they feel to their peers during and after a wilderness experience. They are often astounded that these feelings toward one another, some of which they have never felt towards peers, can be attained in such a short period of time. A student on a recent trip expressed, "The trip was something totally different from what we are used to. Socially, everyone acted

differently towards one another. Comfort level between people was accelerated. We were strangers and then overnight we were best friends". In another example, prior to a weekend trip, one student wrote, "I sort of feel I am not quite in place yet." Uncomfortable with the social situation, he had not had the opportunity to become familiar with many peers. However, soon into the trip he found himself thrown into an intense interpersonal social milieu. Through the activities during the weekend a new social reality was transformed into that of intense human collaboration. This new setting actively promoted and encouraged interpersonal interaction. No longer could he stand aside; the new outdoor social reality would not support alienation. A new social standard was set and encouraged: togetherness, openness, trust and respect. The student reflects, "Here you couldn't hide, you had to speak out."

Practitioners taking their students into a wilderness environment must be sensitive to the shift in the students' physical, social and emotional realities. An empathetic leader, aware of these contrasts in realities from everyday life, will be better able to take advantage of the outdoor's dynamic educational potential and effectively guide their students through an exciting growth process.

Reflection

This growth process can be greatly intensified through the encouraged use of reflection. Without the methodological use of reflection leaders allow the mountains to speak for themselves. The majority of these experiences are enjoyable, stimulating and provide a source for new friendships. However, without processing the experiences' transferable meaning through reflection, these wilderness journeys often lack their empowering substantive effects (Stremba, 1989). Stremba emphasizes the importance of processing the experiences before, during and after a personal journey. Thinking about and discussing feelings, relationships and the accomplishments of one's self and the group enriches, deepens and broadens the outdoor experience. It enhances the awareness of the experiences and facilitates its transformation into everyday life. In the Wilderness Personal Growth Model reflection is sought through the encouragement of appropriate self-disclosure, solo, journal writing, group debriefings and sharing circles. Processing the journey with the assistance of metaphor also provides students with the necessary transfer tools to practise their newly acquired skills and insights at home, long after they have left the mystique of the wilderness. For instance, adventure activities frequently reveal an individual's hidden potential, such as the willingness to take risks that may be useful in their daily life. A recent student writes, "I learned a lot about myself that I didn't know". If left unprocessed, valuable characteristics may go unnoticed and subsequently a precious opportunity for growth may be lost. Similarly, the value of reflection can increase one's awareness of other people's needs and identify how caring individuals can help others to meet their deficiencies.

Unfortunately, reflection is often initially difficult for many people. Today's lifestyles seldom encourage us to slow down and invite contemplation. Relaxation in our everyday lives is too often sought through passive entertainment; the television is an excellent example of a convenient passive time filler in addition to acting as a temporary escape from reality. Our reliance on modern technology is shifting our societal focus from a physically active, socially reflective society to one that demands a tremendous amount of external, passive stimulation and convenience. This 'spectator' society is losing its social and communication skills with others as well as with the self. The potency of education through the out-of-doors is its severance from modern conveniences, a distancing from everyday life, a shift in modern values. Dislodged from these powerful distracters students can be presented with an incredible opportunity through reflection to discover more about themselves, others, as well as the rhythms of nature. Unfortunately, without prior exposure to well structured wilderness experiences, many people fall into society's trap for passive entertainment and

the consumer values it portrays and, subsequently, fail to grasp the paramount educational opportunity of wilderness. Outdoor educators should not waste this dynamic form of wholistic education. Leaders should inspire students to actively reflect upon their physical, emotional and spiritual journeys and thus derive greater meaning, substance and growth from their experience

Self-Disclosure

The encouragement of appropriate self-disclosure during weekend experiences can heighten the reflective process and help to build bridges to other growth processes. Appropriate self-disclosure allows individuals to see through other's masks to a truer identity - their true self. Jouard (1964) metaphorically describes self-disclosure as the "transparent self". Appropriate self-disclosure is a fundamental aspect of sharing circles, where individuals are encouraged to focus on and publicly express their true emotions. These disclosures often include the expression of fears, expectations, highs, lows and appreciation of peers. Sharing circles are often initially difficult and awkward. However, sensitively led they can guide students to empowering revelations of themselves and others and draw peers closer together through mutual trust and respect. A student on a recent trip recounts, "You just started to feel more comfortable once you trusted everybody, especially in the sharing circles. That was a big thing ... It was like talking to somebody sitting beside you that has been your best friend for 20 years.... In the sharing circle everybody is sitting there really listening and you know they really care what you are saying".

Mutuality Model

Another important component of the model is the inclusion of the Mutuality Model (Koziey, 1987). The Mutuality Model is a do-look-learn method of teaching. Conventional teaching has predominantly used the reciprocal learn-look-do methodology, useful in the advancement of physical sciences. However, applied in the human domain it separates and isolates humans from each other. The learn-look-do method assumes that human experiences and learning are understood solely from an external point of view. The goal of this philosophy does not seem to be learning and understanding but of knowledge accumulation (Koziey). Conversely, the Mutuality Model stresses the importance for individuals to recognize that it is their personal responsibility to participate in the creation of their own reality (Koziey). Personal awareness of how one influences their present reality is the key element of this perspective. Personal responsibility and accountability for one's decisions and actions is a real and desirable goal in the process of learning (Powell, 1989). Outdoor education does not want to produce followers, its purpose is to encourage thinking, reflection, awareness and self-responsibility. This process of learning through self-guided discovery was encouraged by Rodgers (1958, as cited by Koziey, 1987). "The only kind of learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovery of self-appropriated learning - truth that has been personally appropriated and assimilated in experience." The Mutuality Model's overall goal is to use this philosophy to facilitate individual growth through activities designed to enhance self-knowing. It is the education of oneself to be oneself.

In a safe outdoor environment the key implementation of this model is restraint from interference with students' experiences and the provision for a climate of trust that is necessary for exploration. Unnecessary assistance to students suggests the students' incompetence (Koziey, 1987). It is therefore necessary for the leader to show respect for students and demonstrate confidence in them by encouraging maximum personal freedom. This trust enhances the students' level of self-responsibility and ultimately the growth derived from the experience. For example, the National

Outdoor Leadership School's (NOLS) philosophy is based on learning by doing. Judgement is enhanced by making one's own decisions, assuming responsibility and being aware of the effects those decisions have on oneself, others and on the natural world. The environment, and rarely the leader, provide feedback on basis of decisions made. Errors in judgement often result in an uncomfortable reality accompanied by valuable lessons. These lessons are empowering and important, as they are real, meaningful, not contrived and are learned through experience (Ratz & Easley, 1987). Gibson (1991) coined this phenomenon "reality confrontation", learning what has meaning and consequence for the here and now. The meaning of this learning involves the action and investment in the total self. Learning by doing provides ownership and self-responsibility to students' decisions as well as fostering independence and pride. "It is through exposing learners to those subjective processes which manufacture their reality that the possibility of growth and transformation is enhanced" (Koziey, 1987). A fundamental component of this theory and thus the model, therefore, is for the leader to step back when appropriate and allow nature to guide the students' experience and the students to guide themselves through much of their own learning processes. This methodology enhances the students' ownership and meaning of their experiences and thus the growth attained through the experiences.

Solo

The Wilderness Personal Growth Model also suggests the use of mini-solos of 45 to 60 minutes in duration during weekend experiences. Solo, quiet self-time apart from others, can offer the most powerful form of private reflection. Severed from external constraints, habitual patterns and usual significant others, the immersion into a novel, refreshing environment can provide treasured opportunities for introspection. The larger the group the more important it becomes for the leader to facilitate this solitary reflective process, because in large groups, solitude, reflection and subsequently self-disclosure are often more difficult for participants to attain. For many, the mini-solo experience is an opportunity to slow down and simply notice, perhaps for the first time, the wonders of nature. For others, this time allows one to reflect upon the trip, the environment, oneself and others. Mortlock (1978) refers to the solo as being the most intense adventure experience. For most students it is an extremely novel time of forced solitude within nature's most precious gift - wilderness. For example, a blazing sunset sinking over a mirror lake, a misty waterfall cascading below a pine forest, leaves drifting down from tree-tops above or a moose grazing on a distant slope. These appreciated memories captured during solo opportunities, however brief, are usually etched in the mind long after they have gone and can continue to provide meaningful reflective thoughts of humility, appreciation and wonder.

Initiative Task Activities

An additional element of the model is the use of cooperative and initiative task games. These activities, dispersed throughout the weekend, help to accelerate the interpersonal trust, respect, cooperation and social cohesion often experienced during longer outdoor trips. An important consideration in the implementation of these activities is to gradually increase their physical and/or social level of risk. The debriefing of these activities with sharing circles helps students to derive greater benefits from their experiences. A student participating on a weekend journey discovered that the group activities enhanced his interest and feelings for his peers as well as his need to become accepted by the group. He explains, "After [the] cooperative games I really wanted to be a part of the group. I wanted to find out more about each person, because social acceptance happened. It brought people together more ... The games brought us closer". Activities that centre around the group context, such as games, facilitate group interaction and thus foster interpersonal

acceptance and trust.

Conclusion

A reader may conclude that the expectations of the intra and interpersonal growth through the use of the Wilderness Personal Growth Model are excessive, especially considering its use with large groups over a short duration. These expectations of the model are indeed high, but, so is the potential of a skilled and sensitive leader to empower students to grow through a weekend wilderness experience, to say nothing of the magical, empowering properties of wilderness. I can think of no finer way to capture the impact of wilderness and the use of this model than through a student who summarizes his recent weekend experience with 27 peers. He states, "I thought it was great. I loved everything I did in it. It was a million times more than I had expected.... Like, it was a big thing for me, it was probably one of the best experiences that I have had in my whole life." A wilderness experience is indeed a rare gift. It is therefore imperative that its growth potential be realized and the fullest be made of the opportunities, however brief, each visit provides.

References

Bacon, S. (1983). *The conscious use of metaphor in Outward Bound*. Colorado: Colorado Outward Bound School.

Gibson, W.G. (1991). *Reality confrontation: The essence of leadership development*. Unpublished manuscript, Camrose Lutheran University College.

Godfrey, R.J. (1972). *Outward bound: A model for educational change and development*. Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, University of Northern Colorado.

Hendee, J.C. & Brown, M. (1988). How wilderness experience programs facilitate personal growth: A guide for program leaders and resource managers. *Renewable Resources Journal*, 6, (2), 9-16.

Jourard, S.M. (1964). *The transparent self: Self-disclosure and well being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Comp.

Koziey, P.W. (1987). Experiencing mutuality. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 10, (3).

Miles, J.C. (1990) Wilderness. In J.C. Miles & S. Priest (Eds.), *Adventure education* (pp. 325-328). State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Miles, J.C. & Priest, S. (1990). *Adventure education*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

Miles, J.C. (1987). Wilderness as a learning place. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 18, (2), pp. 33-40.

Mortlock, C. (1978). *Adventure education*. Ferguson of Keswick.

Potter, T.G. (1992). *Personal growth as a function of participation in a wilderness weekend experience*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Powell, S.J. (1989). *Happiness is an inside job*. Texas: Tabor Publishing.

Ratz, J. & Easley, T.A. (1987). The national outdoor leadership school: Twenty-two years of wilderness education leadership. In J.C. Hendee (Ed.), *The highest use of wilderness*. Idaho: University of Idaho, College of Forestry and Range Sciences.

Stremba, B. (1989). Reflection: A process to learn about self through outdoor adventure. *Journal of Experiential Education, 12*, (2), 7-9.